

Decolonizing Assessment



by

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This past year, I have been working alongside educators all over BC in decolonizing teacher practice, and one of the most common questions I am asked is, ‘how can we decolonize assessment?’ This is a complicated question, because the conversation about assessment practices is a much larger one. In this reflection, I will explore some of the connections I am making with my own personal teaching practice, and include some of my recent conversations with educators.

Before we get started, I will remind you that colonized education is established on the structure of power. This hierarchy of power is based on the western colonial education model, which was made by white settlers, for white settlers. The history of education in BC is rooted in both assimilation and colonization. Edgar Ryerson was known as the ‘Father of the Public Education System’; he created BC’s and Canada’s public education systems, and was also the man who created the residential school system. The Canadian government used the residential school system as a tool of assimilation for all Indigenous children. Knowing that the two systems were created and built by the same person helps us put into perspective our own education, and what was purposefully left out of our learning. It also gives us an outlook on our role as educators, if we hope to change how things have always been done.

It has been well documented that the current education system is problematic for non-white students. As we learn to understand the inequities within our system, the key for change will be relationships. Relationships are at the core of decolonized teacher practice; decolonizing the system will require building relationships with students, families, and the school community. Connecting to students – and understanding who they are and how they learn – will support your understanding of how you can assess their learning in a process of learning together. Relationships will help support this as you co-create the assessment process with students. This is a process-orientated practice that will take time and constant reflection, but will support students in finding their own voice and their own strengths. It allows for students to express themselves in their work, and this can include their culture, history, and world view – it can also include their anger, frustration, and joy.

The purpose of decolonizing the assessment process is to invite students into the role as a collaborator in assessment and learning. Including them in the process allows the students to think about how they best express themselves. It can also challenge the students to hold themselves accountable in the work they choose to do when they are now playing an active role in their own success. Co-creating assessment takes away the colonial hierarchy of power that the current system is built upon. The colonial process of the teacher deciding what, how, and when a student learns leaves out the most important component of the learning process: who is the student, and how do they learn? When the role of the learning process is shared, students are asked to acknowledge that they have a part to play in their own success. Collaboration is a huge factor in a decolonized teaching practice, as we learn and grow more together. Self-reflection and goal setting are built right into the BC curriculum, and this accentuates the importance of this work in the classroom.

I am thinking at this point that you were hoping that I would give you a checklist for how to decolonize assessment. I am sorry to let you down, but I won't be doing that. Each student and each assessment looks different because we are all different in the ways we approach learning and teaching. What I *can* do is offer some ideas on how you can personally approach the work of decolonizing assessment.

Begin by taking some time to think about what it is you are teaching, then create ways in which you can invite students into being co-creators of the learning process. In what ways can your students show you their learning? How are you asking students to show up in their own work? How are you giving students the opportunity to see themselves in their work? Are you offering options for how they show you their learning – not just written output, but oral projects, videos, podcasts, and/or artwork? There are many ways students can share with you their process and their learning from the work you do together. As teachers, we all know that there will be times when students will learn more than what was intended within a lesson or project, so be mindful of the ways you acknowledge or

identify this unexpected learning and the connections created within the process of assessment. This holds the space for you as the educator to be responsive to the students' needs within their own learning. Part of our work as educators is observing, noticing, and responding to the evolving learning that is happening for the student. Allowing students to have choice and voice gives students agency over their learning and the learning process.

To summarize, there is neither a checklist nor a one-size-fits-all guide for this work. It is a co-creation with your students, and the work that you are designing together supports the learning in your classroom. Decolonizing teacher practice is an ongoing practice that everyone can do every day in education. We will all get better at this work when we hold ourselves accountable, and commit to continual reflection. Think about the questions you might ask yourselves: 'What did I do today that was decolonizing my classroom practice?', and 'In what ways did I disrupt the colonial narrative, rather than perpetuating it?'

Stop, pause, reflect, repeat...



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